

The Criminal “Others”: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Critique of the Victorian Obsession with Racial and Sexual “Other” in *Cranford*

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On 28 April 1870 passersby were astonished to see two glamorous women being arrested as they departed The Strand Theatre in London after a show. Unaware that they were being closely observed by the police officers, the women openly flirted with the male members of the audience throughout the show. The arresting officer arrested them on the charge of being men in female attire. The officer was proved correct in his belief. The “women” were Fanny and Stella, a pair of middle-class gentlemen with a predilection for cross-dressing, and their subsequent court trial for being transvestites scandalised England. The rather strict and restricted moral and ethical codes of the nineteenth century branded any deviation from the normative as an anomaly and subject to criminal offence. The case of Fanny and Stella reinforced the Victorian obsession with the “other”, “whether that other was the imperial subject in a far-off colony, the revolting emancipated inhabitant of the slum dwelling or the newly demonized criminal” (Maunder and Moore, 4). Not just the imperial, racial and social “other”, the nineteenth century was also notoriously famous (or infamous?) for its treatment of the sexual other. Neil Mckenna in his 2013 book *Fanny and Stella*, based on the real-life trial of the two cross-dressed gentlemen, explains that the furor surrounding their trial can be put down to the Victorian society experiencing one of its periodic anxiety attack about homosexuality (which had recently become a term to describe an identity rather than a behaviour), sexually transmitted diseases, death and effeminisation of a previously masculine Britain. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality (Volume I)* argues that the valorisation of the heterosexual couple in the post-industrial scenario brought in its

league the persecution and criminalisation of alternative sexualities. He cites the nineteenth century as the period when any form of sexual transgression, that is, any deviation from monogamous heterosexuality was persecuted and criminalised.

Breaking the rules of marriage or seeking strange pleasures brought an equal measure of condemnation. On this list of grave sins, and separated only by their relative importance, there appeared debauchery (extramarital relations), adultery, rape, spiritual or carnal incest, but also sodomy, or the mutual "caress." As to the courts, they could condemn homosexuality as well as infidelity, marriage without parental consent, or bestiality . . . Doubtless acts "contrary to nature" were stamped as especially abominable, but they were perceived simply as an extreme form of acts "against the law"; . . . [However] the "nature" on which they were based was still a kind of law. (Foucault 38)

Foucault's argument makes it explicit that "nature" in British law did not relate to the natural and was rather a man-made product. So, while infidelity was condemnable because it was contrary to the "nature" of the institution of marriage, homosexuality was a punishable offence as it was opposed to heterosexuality that was deemed natural by the Victorian society. The nineteenth century was also the time when British imperialism was increasing its foothold over the various colonies around the globe. This rise in imperialistic endeavours called for the construction of an image of the masculine Englishman who is superior to the natives of the colonies. A strict adherence to heterosexuality, therefore, became a prerequisite for building up the figure of the "manly Englishman" (Sinha 2) in the empire. Heterosexuality was equated with power, be it over women, colonies, servants or miscegenation. Hence, effeminate men, or men given to transvestism were the "other" who could challenge and destroy the carefully erected image of the "manly Englishman". Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 - 1865) openly criticises the Victorian attitude toward the sexual other through the character of Peter Jenkyns in *Cranford* (1853) and also points out the hypocrisy and the hollowness inherent in the image of the masculine Englishman.

Cranford is predominantly a tale of the single women of the titular town. Gaskell in the very opening chapter states that the town is "in possession of the Amazons" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 39), identifying the elderly spinsters and widows of the space with the members of an exclusively female state who were, according to Greek legend,

famous for their skills as warriors. The very few male characters are removed pretty early from the picture either through death or through the demands of their profession. So, Captain Brown and Mr. Holbrook exit the narrative in quick succession through death; Signor Brunoni leaves the town to respond to the calls of his profession; Miss Matilda's father and her brother Peter emerge majorly from memories that were preserved in her mind and from some old family letters; and Peter returns in person to Cranford only towards the close of the novel. However, despite making the women the locus of her narrative, Gaskell chooses the figure of Peter to make her representation of ambiguous gendering. Describing the nature of her brother, Miss Matilda Jenkyns tells the narrator Mary Smith

[H]e seemed to think that the Cranford people might be joked about, and made fun of, and they did not like it; nobody does. He was always hoaxing them; . . . He was like dear Captain Brown in always being ready to help any old person or a child. Still, he did like joking and making fun; (Gaskell, *Cranford* 93 - 94)

For Peter, 'hoaxing', 'joking' and 'making fun' comprised of concealing his identity and making successful appearance before the society as a woman. His first act of disobedience toward gender conventions comes as he impersonates a female admirer of his father's sermons. Dressed up as a lady, he goes unrecognised by his father, dramatising a duality of personas when he is then forced to copy out sermons for "the lady." Furthermore, the narrative's high ambivalence toward gender is revealed through Peter's impersonation of his elder sister, Deborah.

Deborah had gone from home for a fortnight or so; . . . [Peter] went to her room, it seems and dressed himself in her old gown, and shawl, and bonnet; just the things she used to wear in Cranford, and was known by everywhere; and he made the pillow into . . . a little baby, with white long clothes . . . And he went and walked up and down in the Filbert walk - just half hidden by the rails, and half seen; and he cuddled his pillow, just like a baby; and talked to it all the nonsense people do. (Gaskell, *Cranford* 95)

Through his bold and explicit cross-dressing hoax, Peter displays how gender could be constructed through performance. And in doing so, Gaskell through his character

actually anticipates the much later theory that would examine gender as a performance with the publication of Judith Butler's phenomenal study *Gender Trouble* (1990). However, what is relevant here is not how Peter dares to break down the stereotypical portrayal of gender by existing in his moment of performance as a multiplicity, embodying both himself and his sister, but how the nineteenth century treats his anti-normative behaviour. Miss Matilda relates to Mary Smith the unfortunate turn of events that followed soon after "Poor Peter's" act of transgression:

[M]y father came stepping stately up the street . . . he looked through the rails himself . . . his face went quite grey-white with anger, and his eyes blazed out under his frowning black brows; and he soke out . . . and bade them all stop where they were . . . and, swift as light, he was in at the garden door, and down the Filbert walk, and seized hold of poor Peter, and tore his clothes off his back - bonnet, shawl, gown, and all - and threw the pillow among the people over the railings: and then he was very, very angry indeed; and before all the people he lifted up his cane, and flogged Peter. (Gaskell, *Cranford* 95-96)

In an era when the imperial nation was making desperate attempts at establishing the Englishmen as manly and strong, Peter's predilection for cross-dressing symbolically reveals the truth of the "other" Englishmen who are effeminates and homosexuals. The offence of Peter Jenkyns through cross-dressing, thus, runs deeper than the issue of homosexuality. It is intricately linked to the construction of a nation's identity that was desperately trying to hold on to its masculinity. And hence, though he escapes his first adventure as a woman scot-free, he has to face punishment in the second instance. Peter is flogged not merely because as an upstart child he damages the family's reputation, but because despite being a Victorian male he dares to upset the established structures. The act of flogging gains significance when the cane is read as a phallic symbol and Rector Jenkyns's flogging of Peter as a symbolic act of reasserting his phallic control over his son. Peter dared to be the "other" and so faced the brunt of a patriarchal society which is obsessed with masculinity and heterosexuality. His punishment does not end with the flogging, though the act has already seemingly transformed him into a man. Miss Matty narrates that when Peter came in to take leave of his mother, he looked "like a man, not like a boy" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 96). Peter is forced to exit the narrative, because a man given to transvestism has no place

in an imperial power that is trying to spread its domination over the rest of the world by holding on to its masculinity. He is allowed an honourable integration into the English society only when he proves his heterosexuality and manliness in the overseas colonial projects of the Empire. Miss Matty records the moment when Peter is finally given respect by a society that had initially shunned him:

[Peter] came home a Lieutenant; he did not get to be the Admiral. And he and my father were such friends! My father took him into every house in the parish, he was so proud of him. He never walked out without Peter's arm to lean upon. (Gaskell, *Cranford* 103)

Through this episode, Gaskell exposes the hypocrisy inherent in the construction of the figure of the "manly Englishman". The readers are made aware that the now masculine Peter has a latent potential to subvert the gender stability by refusing to cohere. As Carolyn Lambert observes, he does not merely resist masculine gender conventions, in his action he "is challenging constructs of both masculinity and femininity" (77). Gaskell criticises the rigid refusal of the Victorian society to accept and accommodate different forms of sexualities by pointing out that the social construction of the image of the heterosexual masculine Englishman was often a product of society's force upon a non-conforming male figure. Peter Jenkyns was a non-conformist in every sense of the term and had it not been for the pressure of the society in the form of his father's flogging, he would probably have grown up into an adult exploring his alternative sexualities. However, the obsession of the nineteenth century to brand any form of the "other" as criminals does not spare Peter as well. He is flogged for his criminal offence of cross-dressing and is forgiven only when he adheres to the normative structures of the society.

Cranford is not only a critique of the Victorian condemnation of the sexual other, but also the criminalisation of the racial other. After the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, an attempt was made to biologise crime thereby branding the black-skinned colonised as criminals by virtue of their genetic history. Though *Cranford* was published much before Darwin's work on evolutionary history, Elizabeth Gaskell as a distant cousin of the former was quite well informed about his researches. Her sympathy toward the colonised natives is manifested in the way she brings out the Victorian habit of equating the black-skinned racial others with criminals. In a small passage in the third chapter of the narrative, Gaskell introduces the minor

character of Miss Matilda Jenkyn's cousin, a retired Major from India, and his wife who brings with them to Cranford a Hindoo body-servant and a steady elderly maid. While Martha cannot stop "staring at the East Indian's white turban and brown complexion" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 68), diminishing the native to the position of an exotic object to be gazed at, Miss Matty asked Mary Smith if the Hindoo servant did not remind her of the "Blue Beard". The "Blue Beard" was a folk villain, best known through the story by Charles Perrault, which appeared in 1697. The Blue Beard who had systematically murdered his wives and kept their bodies locked in the castle was a vicious diabolic villain characterised by his blue coloured beard. Though the physical appearance of the Hindoo servant did not remotely resemble that of the villain of Charles Perrault's folk tale, Miss Matty's equation of them reflects the general Victorian attitude of viewing the natives as devilish criminals capable of committing heinous crimes. Through Miss Matty who is reminded of the villain Blue Beard at the sight of the Hindoo servant, Gaskell ridicules the tendency of the Victorian people to criminalise the racial other even if the latter is perfectly harmless. Her ridicule gains an even greater significance through her portrayal of the Cranfordians' assessment of the Irish. In the chapter suitably titled "The Panic" Gaskell makes a subtle and gentle mockery of the residents of Cranford who were fascinated with the idea of being under attack by some racial other. It is not the actual attack, but the baseless panic of it that leads to the conjuring up of theories and possibilities and rumours about the Irish being the perpetrator of the robberies that had suddenly awakened the passive little town from a peaceful reverie. The convenient criminalisation of the other while saving their own kin was the general predilection of the Victorian English. So when the news of two "real *bona fide* robberies" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 138) reached the Amazons of Cranford, their negotiation with the ghastly news in order to come to terms with it was by blaming the racial other as the culprit:

[W]e comforted ourselves with the assurance which we gave to each other, that the robberies could never have been committed by any Cranford person; it must have been a stranger or strangers who brought this disgrace upon the town, and occasioned as many precautions as if we were living among the Red Indians or the French. (Gaskell, *Cranford* 139)

This association of the Red Indians with danger and the French as active agents who use the Red Indians to wreck havoc on the lives of the English is a theory that will

again re-emerge in 1859 in Gaskell's novella *Lois the Witch*. In *Lois the Witch* Elizabeth Gaskell lays bare the absurd analogy that the English people draw between the indigenous cultural practice of the Red Indians to paint their faces with the devil who was also painted, thereby branding the Red Indians as evil spirits in disguise sent to ruin the New Englanders, and in league with the French, the latter paying them with enormous amount of gold to scalp off the Englishmen's heads. While this obsession with sealing the racial other as inhuman criminals was a common practice in Victorian England, Cranford becomes a microcosm to show how the English were also desperate to prove their intellectual and cultural superiority over the Irish, their immediate geographical neighbour, to validate their rule over Ireland. This validation could be made fool-proof only by reiterating the obnoxious convention of establishing the "other" as uncivilised, uncouth and savage, and hence in absolute need of the guidance of the civilised "self" under whose colonised protection the "other" can transform itself into human from being beast. The nineteenth century took the aid of the science of "Phrenology" to further advance the theories of race by demonstrating that the structure of the skull, especially the jaw formation and facial angles, revealed the position of various races on the evolutionary scale, which gave emergence to the debate over whether there was one creation for all mankind (monogenism) or several (polygenism). The debate was eventually settled in favour of the "popular quasi-polygenist prejudices in the language of science" (Stephan 30). Such prejudices helped in creating an atmosphere congenial to racial stereotyping and Ireland failed to escape its clutches. Anthony S. Wohl writes:

In much of the pseudoscientific literature of the day the Irish were held to be inferior, an example of a lower evolutionary form, closer to the apes than their "superiors", the Anglo-Saxons. Cartoons in *Punch* portrayed the Irish as having bestial, apelike or demonic features and the Irishman, (especially the political radical) was invariably given a long or prognathous jaw, the stigmata to the phrenologists of a lower evolutionary order, degeneracy, or criminality. (1)

Such a portrayal of the Irish with bestial traits appears in Miss Poles's description of the strangers who had walked past her home thrice, "very slowly" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 140) along with an Irish beggar-woman who had dared to push "herself in past Betty, saying her children were starving, and she must speak to the mistress" (Gaskell,

Cranford 141). What concerned Miss Pole was the Irish beggar-woman's knowledge that the house belongs to a "mistress" and not a "master" in spite of a hat hanging up in the hall. Miss Pole's implication is that the Irish woman must have been keeping a close watch on her home with her male partners to gain enough information as is conducive for a robbery. However, what she overlooks is the fact that Irish beggars were a common sight in early Victorian England, driven to leave Ireland by the dreadful series of famines in the first half of the nineteenth century. Instead of unearthing the real reason behind the desperation of the Irish beggar-woman who has starving children to feed, Miss Pole as a representative of the quintessential Victorian English citizen, stamps her and her companions with the title of "that murderous gang" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 144). The absurdity of her inference is brought out through the narrator Mary Smith's sarcastic comment on how with every subsequent retelling about the strangers, Miss Pole adds a new negative dimension to their physical attributes:

She described their appearance in glowing colours, and I noticed that every time she went over the story some fresh trait of villainy was added to their appearance. One was tall - he grew to be gigantic in height before we had done with him; he of course had black hair - and by-and-by, it hung in elf-locks over his forehead and down his back. The other was short and broad - and a hump sprouted out on his shoulder before we heard the last of him; he had red hair - which deepened into carrot; and she was almost sure he had a cast in the eye - a decided squint. As for the woman, her eyes glared, and she was masculine-looking - a perfect virago; most probably a man dressed in woman's clothes: afterwards, we heard of a beard on her chin, and a manly voice and a stride. (Gaskell, *Cranford* 144-145).

Mary Smith's sarcastic observation not only reveals the attitude of the English to criminalise the racial "other" but also the sexual "other". The ever-increasing traits of villainy that Miss Pole attaches to the appearances of the three Irish people resonate the English way of racial stereotyping using the language of science. Her description of the "murderous gang" shows the way the English linked the Irish with the bestial apes, thereby foregrounding their deduction of the racial others' lower status, degeneracy and criminality. Moreover, the doubt that the masculine-looking woman was perhaps a man dressed in woman's attire further validates Miss Pole's criminalisation of the

Irish beggar-woman, transvestism being a punishable offence in Victorian England. Through this episode Gaskell makes gentle fun, at a microcosmic level, of the larger contemporary English endeavours to biologise the criminality of the Irish by using the science of Phrenology.

Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that it is only through the intervention of someone else that an individual can be established as an “other”. The intervention of the societal codes of Nineteenth Century England posited any deviation from heteronormativity as the sexual “other” and any race apart from their own as the racial “other”. In their pursuit of superiority, the English not only created various categories of otherness, but also left no stone unturned to brand those “others” as perpetrators of various kinds of crime, be it the crime of cross-dressing or the crime of robbery. Elizabeth Gaskell subtly opposes this construction of the criminal “other”. Through the character of Peter Jenkyns and the episode of the Irish beggar-woman, she attempts to expose to her readers the absurdity of the entire ideology of “othering” an individual, and the hypocrisy inherent in the distinction between the “self” and the “other”. By revealing that neither Peter nor the Irish beggar-woman was a criminal, the author tries to make the educated middle-class British aware of the injustice that they were meting out toward anyone who does not conform to the stereotype of a perfect English gentleman. The revelation about the truth of Samuel Brown and his family whose first appearance as three strangers at Cranford had triggered off “the great Cranford panic” (Gaskell, *Cranford* 155) points out the ease with which the English blamed the racial others of crime without making any effort of knowing the actual truth. Similarly, the manhood that was forcefully imposed upon Peter, though makes him acceptable within the society, leaves a possibility of his alternate sexuality lurking deep within himself. Gaskell through the narrative of *Cranford* aims toward accommodating the different forms of “others” into the mainstream English society by positing the “self” and the “other” on the same platform. In their unjust accusation of the “other” of crime, the “self” is also committing a criminal offense. For accusing an innocent of crimes that he has not committed, the accuser in the eyes of law can also be charged of criminal offense. Gaskell criticises the Victorian obsession of branding the “other” as criminals by not only exposing the absurdity of it, but also by showing that the normative Victorians were no less criminals in their use of Science to prove the inferiority of the other races and in their attempts to mould everyone into

one rigid structure, leaving no room for individuality.

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But Elizabeth Gaskell was abandoned by her father, three of her children dead in infancy and there was an intriguing affair with an American toyboy. It distinguished her from other women writers of the time, such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, who were spinsters and childless. And it was true. Married to a minister, bringing up four children, keeping hearth and home, engaging herself in charity, the author of Cranford embodied old-fashioned femininity. From the comfort of that married bliss, she ran a canny eye over the outside world, its quirks and its characters, especially those souls who, unlike her, were without men. She created the town of Cranford - based on Knutsford in Cheshire where she spent the most formative years of her life. Based on three Elizabeth Gaskell novels "The Cranford Chronicles" follows the small absurdities and major tragedies in the lives of the people of Cranford, a small Cheshire market town, during one extraordinary year. In this witty and poignant story the railway is pushing its way relentlessly towards the town from Manchester, bringing fears of migrant workers and the breakdown of law and order. The arrival of handsome young Doctor Harrison causes yet further agitation not just because of his revolutionary methods but also because of his effect on the hearts of the ladies. Elizabeth Gaskell. You know, my dears, that your mother was an orphan, and an only child; and I daresay you have heard that your grandfather was a clergyman up in Westmoreland, where I come from. Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction is beginning to receive the attention it deserves; her novels are widely available in paperback editions, several have been adapted for radio and television, and recent critical studies have helped to establish her as one of the important novelists of the Victorian period. But, curiously, her shorter pieces have been largely disregarded by publishers and critics alike, perhaps because until now many have been difficult for modern readers to access, though both T. A. Ward and Clement Shorter included most of them in their respective Knutsford (1906) and World's Classics.